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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 002818

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: BEIJING HOUSING DEMOLITION HIGHLIGHTS LACK OF
MEDIA ACCESS, PERCEIVED ROLE OF WEN JIABAO

REF: A. FBIS/OSC CPP20080715968041
[1](#)B. FBIS/OSC CPP20080715968208

Classified By: Classified by Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlso
n. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: A simmering dispute between the residents of a Beijing neighborhood and local authorities over plans to demolish the area's old housing came to a head last week when some residents refused to move. The incident highlights the continuing resistance of local officials to media coverage by foreign journalists and the tendency of ordinary citizens to look to top leaders, especially Premier Wen Jiabao, to address their grievances. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

Promised Access for Foreign Media Unfulfilled

[1](#)2. (C) In contrast to Olympics-related Government assurances of free access for foreign journalists, on the evening of July 9, PolOff and about a hundred local residents witnessed three uniformed police officers take into custody an Italian student whom they mistook for a journalist interviewing neighbors. A plainclothes police officer told PolOff the foreigner was an "unaccredited" Italian journalist detained for "interviewing" the residents of a condemned house and that police were seeking to determine why the "journalist" was interviewing people. When pressed to explain the difference between speaking legally with a Chinese resident and "interviewing" someone, the officer said he was "unclear" on the distinction as he was new on the job.

[1](#)3. (C) An Italian Embassy contact later confirmed to PolOff that the Italian citizen was a student, not a reporter. The student intended to shoot video of the house. The contact said the police informed the detained student that foreigners were not allowed to shoot video in Beijing.

Appeal to "People's Premier" for Help

[1](#)4. (C) The occupants of the condemned house, which doubles as a small grocery store and is home to 14 members of an extended family, have lived there for 60 years (refs A and B). Beginning in 2005, much of the neighborhood, which is located roughly a mile north of Tiananmen Square near the trendy Houhai area of Beijing, has been razed and is only now being touched up and beautified for the Olympic Games. One of the building's fourteen residents told PolOff July 10 that the Government intends to tear down the house and has offered the family only RMB 340,000 (USD 50,000) as compensation. The occupants pointed out a police van parked across the street, which they claim is stationed there to watch them. They said the house was scheduled for destruction that day. (Note: According to ref A, a court order posted outside the house directed the residents to leave by Sunday evening, July 13, not July 10, in order for officials to prepare for the Olympic torch relay to pass through the area.)

15. (C) PolOff observed that the house was covered with pictures of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping for more than a year in an apparent attempt to forestall eviction. Several weeks ago, neighborhood residents began plastering their houses with pictures of Premier Wen Jiabao, along with appeals to Wen scrawled on the walls of gutted houses nearby. "Premier Wen, they are going to tear down my house. Come have a look anytime," said one slogan. Another declared that "Premier Wen is the best, he cares for the common people." Local officials promptly painted over the appeals. More recently, pictures and appeals to "Elder Brother Hu (Jintao)" have appeared. On July 7, two days before the protest erupted, PolOff noticed the occupants had taken the further step of erecting three PRC national flags and a Beijing 2008 Olympics flag on the premises.

House Still Standing

16. (C) On July 15, Western media reported that over 200 bystanders had gathered near the house late on July 13, as the family made a last-ditch effort to fight eviction. According to the reports, the family matriarch used an amplifier to broadcast her family's plight to the crowd at about 11 p.m. as the deadline drew closer, claiming the family supports the Olympics but opposes officials depriving them of property in the name of the Games. The crowd grew as midnight approached in expectation that officials would raid the house and evict the family. The woman reportedly told bystanders the next day that police and judges had visited the house and warned that a forceful eviction might take

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place. When PolOff visited the site on Tuesday, July 15, new pictures and appeals had been covered up with tape but the house was still standing.
RANDT